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Population churning in Valley

Steady growth belies constant flux

By Clint Williams
Staff Writer

Philadelphia native Sandi Dunn is leaving Scottsdale after only a year, without ever getting to know her neighbors.

"They kept moving out," the Atlanta-bound sales rep said.

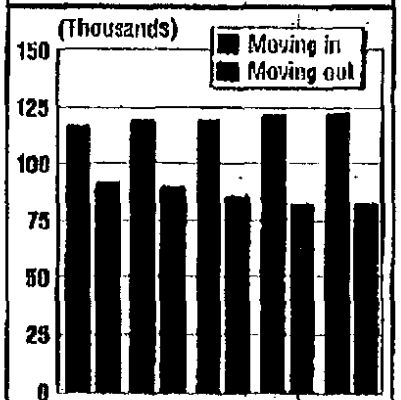
Rich Tanella and his wife moved to Peoria from Long Island in August 1994. He likes his neighbors, but Arizona is too far from the ocean and too far from family and lifelong friends. The Tanellas will try Florida.

"We thought this was the place for us, and we tried it and it's not for us," Rich Tanella said. "There is not too much to keep us here."

At first blush, the Valley's population growth resembles a steadily rising pond, with thousands trickling in each year. Look more closely and you see the water is roiling.

PASSING THROUGH

Number of people who move into and out of the Valley for fiscal years ending June 30.



Source: Center for Business Research, ASU College of Business

Staff artist

More than 100,000 people move into Maricopa County every year, but nearly that many move out. Migration added 41,000 people to the Valley in the fiscal year that ended June 30, but while 123,000 moved in, 82,000 moved out. That pattern of three in, two out has endured for at least 15 years.

Such churn is a byproduct of rapid growth in Arizona. And it has a

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pervasive, though subtle, influence on how we live.

Churn makes it harder for charities to raise money, keeps real-estate prices in check and politics volatile. It negates home-field advantage for home-grown retailers and contributes to urban sprawl. A study by researchers at the University of Washington suggests that communities with a high rate of mobility have more problems with drugs, vandalism and crime.

Other studies show metro Phoenix is a turnstile city.

The average American home changes ownership once every 11.8 years, according to a survey by the Chicago Title and Trust Co. In Arizona, the survey found, the turnover rate in 1994 was 6.2 years, the fastest in the country.

The U.S. Census Bureau ranks metropolitan Phoenix fourth in the country in the percentage of "movers," folks who moved into their homes within 15 months of the 1990 census. Nearly a third of the people in the Valley were labeled "movers."

Experts note several factors in the ebb and flow of humanity here.

From the smog-choked megalopolis of Southern California to the icy small towns of the Midwest to the poor villages of Sonora, Phoenix shines as a boom town, a promising place to start a new life. When the reality doesn't match the dream, people move on.

Annelise Thomsen moved to Phoenix from Chicago in 1991.

"I thought that maybe there would be more opportunity here," the 26-year-old bartender said. "You can make a good living, but for advancement, it was not here.

"You absolutely have to have an education to make it here. It's a tough town."

Thomsen left last month for Chicago, where her parents can help care for her 3-year-old daughter while she attends college.

Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/yyjm0004

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Valley population churns beneath veneer of steady growth

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Others move to the Valley knowing they won't be here long, that the stop here is one of many along a career path.

Julie and Jeff Stokowski are preparing for their fourth move since 1983 as Jeff, a service representative for Caterpillar, moves up with the heavy-equipment manufacturer. After almost five years, the family is leaving Tempe for Chicago, just when they're getting comfortable here.

"It takes about a year to really begin to fit in," Julie said.

Fitting in has been made easier because of her children, ages 5, 7 and 9.

"I've been the soccer mom, the basketball mom," said Julie, a Brownie troop leader. "If I didn't have my kids, I would have had a much harder time."

Sandi Dunn's children are grown, and without such a natural conduit to community activities, she found it difficult to meet people.

"Every place I've lived, I've made lots of friends," she said, "but not here."

Dunn, the Stokowskis and the Tanellas represent the notable churn among professionals and white-collar workers, said Tom Rex of the Center for Business Research at Arizona State University's College of Business.

"Even if they wanted to stay here, they can't because we don't have the corporate headquarters here," he said.

To move up, they must move on.

Real-estate agent Bob Turner, who specializes in an area of south Tempe, said at least 25 percent of his clients in the past two years are leaving because of transfers.

Arizona's high housing turnover keeps prices in check, experts said.

"It's good for the market because it keeps a steady supply in a growing market," said Jay Butler of ASU's Center for Real Estate.

Although the population churn is good for real-estate agents, it is a handicap for another Valley businessman: Eddie Basha.

"The perception is that the hometown business has a leg up, but that is far from true," said Basha, chief executive of the 73-store grocery-store chain that bears his name.

Many people moving into Arizona already are familiar with such regional chains as Safeway, Basha said.

Consequently, Bashas' must spend more in advertising. It exceeds the industry standard of spending 1 percent of gross operating profit on ads, Basha said.

Hometown retailers "have to continually build your brand," said Beau Lane, of E B Lane & Associates Advertising, the oldest advertising agency in the Valley.

National retailers such as Target, Wal-Mart and Home Depot have the advantage, Lane said.

"Consequently, it can cost a lot more to do business here," he said.

For example, Lane said, the print ads of client Popular Outdoors, a chain of stores selling camping, fishing and hunting equipment, include the addresses of all the stores, which eats space and costs more.

"Popular Outdoors has been here 35 years, but we have to be continually out there to let people know what we are and where we are," Lane said.

It takes folks moving into town a while to get up to speed, and that has a measured effect on politics. It takes three to five years, experts say, before people become engaged in local politics.

"A lot of people are coming here for the Great American Opportunity," said Earl de Berge, a pollster in Arizona for 33 years. "Politics is the very last thing they're interested in."

In Mesa, which grew by 41,000 people from 1990 to 1995, the turnout for the March primary election was 20 percent and wouldn't have been that big if not for a referendum on a tough anti-smoking ordinance. The turnout for the 1994 city election was 10.8 percent.

In Chandler, where the population grew 42 percent from 1990 to 1995, turnout for the 1994 city election was 9 percent. One precinct with 2,331 registered voters had just 94 ballots cast.

Such low participation means that small, well-organized groups have disproportionate influence, and that politics are more volatile, political experts say. And the turnover in electorate means politicians can enjoy more comebacks.

"There is no collective memory, so people get away with stuff here they probably couldn't elsewhere," said Terry Goddard, who some might remember as a former Phoenix mayor and gubernatorial hopeful. "Somebody could have been a scoundrel 10 years ago and most people wouldn't know it."

The apathy extends to philanthropy. Per capita giving, the best measure of how strongly a community supports the United Way, is woefully low in the Valley.

"We rank toward the bottom of the list of cities our size," said Brian Hassett, executive director of the Valley of the Sun United Way.

Per capita giving in Phoenix is about $13. In Mesa, it's about $12. In Des Moines, it is $33.

"People don't have the connectedness to the community," said Dan Duncan, president of the Mesa United Way. "We have people tell us they give to the United Way 'back home.' Their roots aren't here, the commitment isn't here."

Mobility also has effects that are difficult to measure with statistics.

"In a city of immigrants, it's harder to find a collective vision," Goddard said. "I think it is one of the reasons Phoenix has sprawled the way it has, because people didn't have a concept of what it ought to look like, so anything went. If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there."

Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/yyjm0004